

In His Own Words

A tribute to Burns W. “Bud” Roper

Since his death in January at age 77, much has been written about Burns W. “Bud” Roper and his contributions to polling and public opinion research.

We at the Roper Center share a unique bond with the Roper family beyond just the name. In addition to serving as chairman of the Center’s Board of Directors and teaching at the University of Connecticut, Bud Roper was a frequent contributor to *Public Perspective* magazine. He co-authored, with Center executive director Everett C. Ladd, the cover article in the November/December 1989 inaugural edition of what was then called *The Public Perspective*.

Others have spoken—and will continue to speak—eloquently about Bud Roper and his legacy. In this tribute, however, we offer a look at the man and his ideas through his own words, as they appeared over the years in this magazine.

“The highest claim of opinion polling is... that it can amplify the public’s voice, letting that voice be heard clearly amidst the babble of special interest pleading and partisan jockeying. The goal is at once enormously worthy, and extremely difficult to achieve.”

“I don’t want to just meet the standards and fail to do the job.”



“When I began at the Roper Organization, there were many skeptics who said, ‘You can’t tell me what a country of 120 million people thinks with only 4,000 interviews.’ 1936 showed you could.”



Bud Roper flew 35 bombing missions over Europe during World War II. He is shown here in uniform with his brother Jimmy and an unidentified woman.

“Bias or conditioning in the wording of a question is usually rather easy to spot. Bias or conditioning as a result of context is often more difficult to spot—particularly if the context is not revealed, either unintentionally or purposely.”

“I have always believed that public opinion polls make one of their greatest contributions when used to assess the validity of ‘common knowledge.’”



This photo accompanied a 1996 Public Perspective article in which the second generation of pollsters, Helen Crossley, Bud Roper and George Gallup Jr., discussed the development of public opinion research as pioneered by their fathers, Archibald Crossley, Elmo Roper and George Gallup Sr.

On exit polling: “My idea is: report results at noon, stressing how the late vote could change it even more if they get to the polls.... I think that rather than declaring the election over, this could keep it even more alive. If registered non-voters would get off their duff, they could change the prevailing distribution.”

“Politicians have actively contributed to the public’s perception that ‘Politicians are no damn good.’ At campaign time, just listen to one candidate criticize his opponent on personal grounds. Corruption, laziness, women, substance abuse, immorality! Who is in a better position to know how sleazy politicians are than politicians!”

“I suspect what the public really wants is ‘better people’ in government, rather than a change in our formal system. But reviling candidates for office in the press, having opponents for a given office defame each other, and having public opinion scorn politicians in general, will not lead to the ‘better people’ that the public is looking for.”



Bud Roper enjoyed his trip to Gallup, New Mexico (left). We don't know if George Gallup ever traveled to Roper, North Carolina. In 1996, Roper (middle) received an honorary doctor of laws degree from Colgate University. He retired to Cape Cod (right), enjoying visits from grandchildren Liam and Mackenzie.

“Many people will tell you the horse race is superficial, but nevertheless, that’s what lots of people want—including a number of those who say it is superficial.”

“I hope we don’t get formalized and rigid in our structure—in our concept of what’s a good poll and what’s a bad poll.”

“Polling, as I have said a number of times, is as much art as science, and I’d like to encourage the art side of it. I’d like to see people not look for what is the accepted way of doing this, but to experiment. If you have another idea, try it.”